To Craft A Skin

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To Craft A Skin

by CestPasDuBaudelaire

Summary

4 times the aftermath of sex was underwhelming.

1 time it truly wasn't.

Or

A take on Hannibal's relationship to sexuality, from disappointment to fulfillment.

Notes

Salut les gens !

So? You survived the AO3 war?
Hope you're doing fine and you had a nice week all the same!

I wrote this work a month ago, and I remember I stopped literally two paragraphs before the end, because I thought it just wasn't worth it.
When AO3 was down, I was really bored, so I looked at my works in progress and I rediscovered this one. I had forgotten everything about it and I was genuinely surprised by how much fun I had rereading it! So I've decided to write that last paragraph and post it in case any of you folks find in it a worthy distraction!

The DubCon is left off screen and open to interpretation (I only tagged it in case some readers are struggling with that topic), and the sex in general is rather light and eluded. It is not a smut story at all, even though it talks of sexuality.

That's all I have to say, hope you'll enjoy ;)

See the end of the work for more notes

To Craft A Skin

Lady Murasaki

Hannibal opened his eyes.

It had been the first time in years that he hadn't dreamed at night. No vision of horror and torment behind his closed eyelids. No haunting memory and no screams in the night.

No flashes of what he had lost either. No. That particular vision waited for him to wake up.

It took a few seconds, in the penumbra of the bedroom, to understand what was under his eyes.

A bare back. A silhouette sitting on the side of the bed. Ready to leave.

"Madame?" he whispered against the pillow.

The silhouette didn't answer, but she turned her head on the side, and her long black hair fell like running water on her back.

Slowly, nearly apologetically, Hannibal reached out. With the tip of his fingers slithering underneath the modest curtain of hair, he followed the relief of the spine. He could sense the skin softly shivering under his thumb as he was drawing the shape of every vertebra. It was fascinating to him that such an otherworldly entity had bothered to dress in a human anatomy. The least he could do was to appreciate the effort.

In the darkness, he sat up and rested his forehead against the woman's neck.

He wished he had been bolder, when he had made love to her. Wished he had shown her how much he had grown since the last time she had hugged him. How tall he was standing now, and how masterful he could be if it so pleased him. But he hadn't. Faced with that beautiful body under the moonlight, a body he had fantasized about throughout his whole teenagerhood, he had hesitated. Seized by a sudden shyness, nearly a shame for his baseness, he had lightened his touch, restrained his bites. His eyes had asked for guidance and his hands had wanted to be held. Like the child he no longer was. If he had ever been.

Hannibal was not so fond of that parody of fragility to begin with. But, in that context, where they were both trying to find in the other what they wanted to see, it felt too much like a plain lie.

And lying to one's mother was wrong, Hannibal had learned early.

His hand, that had so diligently caressed that back, slid on the side and found its way toward the soft, warm belly from which he had nearly come. Then it traveled down.

"It needs to stop, Hannibal," Lady Murasaki said, her voice made only of breath.

Obedient, the hand stopped. The fingers only an inch away from her lips. Instead, Hannibal used his to kiss the lady's neck.

"You cannot continue like that," she said. "That violence. It is destroying you."

Hannibal didn't think he had been violent. His thrusts had been gentle. His kisses warm. His caresses soft. He had brought her to climax with a benevolent slowness.

"You are smelling of blood, Hannibal. And smoke."

Of adulthood, Hannibal thought.

"And you of tea and jasmine," he answered.

Lady Murasaki turned around, now facing him. They were so close he could feel her breasts pressing against his chest. Her hand found the military dog tags hanging from his neck. On them were engraved the names of his past torturers and future victims. Hannibal had found them in his childhood home, not even a week ago. Two down already.

"They say you killed that man in Lithuania," she said, her lips an inch away from his. "That you ate his cheeks."

Hannibal didn't care much about those accusations. He knew they wouldn't catch him in time. Instead of answering, he passed his hand in her hair, watching it slide like liquid velvet between his fingers.

"They say you will kill again. Are those their names?"

Who cared about them right now? Hannibal would take care of them, but later. Now, he was too busy loving. He leaned forward and bridged the inch separating him from Lady Murasaki's mouth. He kissed it with gentleness and soft joy.

"I am losing you, Hannibal," she breathed against their kiss.

And Hannibal thought there was beauty in being lost. His first time discovering Lady Murasaki's body - or any body at all, for that matter - had been a story of lost and found paths. He had been unsure, he had made mistakes, yet he knew he couldn't have dreamed of a better first time. Because there was meaning and grace that could be found in the mist.

"Please, Hannibal," she said and their kisses began to taste like the salt of her tears. "Promise me you will stop. Promise me you will step back."

Hannibal took the time to relinquish the specific burn that came with having lips he loved pressing against his. Something in him already knew it wouldn't happen again.

"I already promised Mischa," he finally answered.

And, no matter how dearly he desired the Lady, there was little she could do against the ghost of the Sister.

Understanding that as well, Lady Murasaki stepped back. Her black eyes, that, as far as Hannibal remembered, had always been wells of darkness, were now shining with tears. But it was with dignity that she grabbed her robe, stood up, and wrapped her beautiful beauty in the silky fabric. Hiding it away from Hannibal's gaze. Never to be seen and tasted again.

"Was it a rescue attempt?" he asked to his aunt's back, which was now out of his reach. "Did you wish to fuck salvation into me?"

He knew his language was raw. Low and unworthy of Lady Murasaki. But a strange, vague burn in his chest was acidifying his words before they could get out of his mouth.

"I thought warmth could make you crave for the sun. And life for life. But I cannot save you if you don't think you need to be saved, Hannibal. You are dedicated to darkness, and there is nothing I can do about it. But let go of you."

She began to walk away from the bed where Hannibal had laid out his virginity and vulnerability for her. He didn't regret it. He had known from the beginning he was tasting a sample of something he would never want to afford. Still, the ache in his chest was... tedious.

"I love you, Madame," he said as she was about to exit the room. "And I am quite sincere."

He was. He loved her. More than he thought he should be able to. He had loved her the second he had heard her voice.

Lady Murasaki, who had stopped in the doorframe to welcome that announcement, didn't move at first. Then she turned around, offering her burning tears and cold expression to Hannibal.

"What is left in you to love, Hannibal?"

And Hannibal had no answer to offer.

Lady Murasaki beheld the sight of her son one last time before turning her back on him and walking away.

Hannibal lay back on the bed. He could still smell on the sheet the tea, the jasmine, the semen and the cyprine.

His chest was pulsing with a throbbing pain that was irradiating through his whole body like some nerve ache. But Hannibal was no stranger to pain, nor was he to grief. He was so familiar with them, actually, that their presence by his side felt like having old friends over.

It was with them that he slept that night, their ghostly embrace too cold to keep him warm in any way.

But Hannibal never came to regret that shared moment. It taught him a lot, and it grew him up more than the natural years had done.

He understood that there was not enough life in him for someone to find warmth against him and stay through the night.

That was an important piece of knowledge to have about himself, and he thanked Lady Murasaki for that parting gift.

Stranger

A wad of banknotes fell on the pillow, a few inches away from Hannibal's face. He detailed it for a second, trying to figure out what his thoughts were about it.

Hannibal had not asked for money. He hadn't truly cared about it. But he had known from the beginning that it was what the man thought it was about. Hannibal didn't feel like proving him wrong. He liked the idea that that man's assumptions had such a straightforwardly quantifiable price.

But Hannibal didn't touch the wad. He had been raised to think that money was vulgar. Which was such an easy mindset to nurture when rich. A much harder one when poor.

Hannibal had no money, no roof, no papers and no family but he had preserved the aristocracy of his demeanor and of his thought patterns. There was a place and a time for money. Post orgasmic rest was not one of them. No matter how ruined and unfulfilling the orgasm had been.

The man was standing next to the bed, dressing up, his hands doing a quick work of the buttons he had so eagerly undone a few minutes earlier.

A single glance had been enough for Hannibal to find him very ugly. Vaulted shoulders, poor taste clothes, hands made trembling by the advanced age. But there was something he had deemed interesting. The unveiled disdain on the old, wrinkly face. The cruelty. And how off-putting it looked.

It had been interesting because Hannibal knew that disdain, and a more insidious version of that cruelty. It was his. A reflection of his. But he certainly didn't want to ever be that ugly. That had made him think about how the flaws of the soul could disfigure the face presented to the world. There was something for him to understand here, Hannibal had realized. He needed to be careful with what he allowed on his features, beyond the mere question of guilt and innocence. He needed to craft a face for himself. A pleasing one. That

would make for good visual pornography for the people around him. He was born with harsh features, but he could still soften them with benevolence, patience and politeness.

Had he needed to sleep with that man in order to reach that conclusion? Probably not. But he didn't have any strong reason not to either.

"Is that enough?" the man asked, while buckling his black leather belt.

Hannibal didn't answer. It was a crude question.

"Do you speak English?" the man asked next, after that silence.

Hannibal had no desire to even acknowledge that question. He simply propped up the pillow, bringing the blanket to him to cover his modesty.

"Do you even understand what I am saying?"

He did. Fully. English had been the fourth foreign language Hannibal had bothered to learn and, by the age of eight, he had been perfectly fluent in both Old and modern English. But he didn't say a word. Some fellow European immigrants had told him it was unwise to speak in public. Not when Americans could not tell the different sovietic accents apart. Not so few decades after McCarthy. But Hannibal wasn't worried. At Hopkins, everyone knew the slight deformation words would suffer against his palate. They all knew a wall had been crossed for him to be here today. That didn't prevent them from knowing he was their better.

Hannibal didn't keep silent out of fear. Simply out of a profound disinterest to share anything with others. Was it one of the things he had to change in order to make himself more attractive than this man? Should he affect kindness and curiosity?

With the tip of his fingers, Hannibal grabbed the wad of money and put it on the bedside table. The man must have interpreted that gesture as Hannibal understanding what was said to him for he continued.

"You can use the shower if you want. I don't care. But I want you gone before my wife's back. If you're not, I swear I'm gonna beat the shit out of you, your own mother won't recognize you."

Hannibal was not afraid. Not impressed either. He simply waited for the end of that interaction.

"Yeah, you don't get a word I'm saying," the man said, as it was the only explanation he could find to Hannibal's complete lack of reaction.

When another answer could just as easily explain it. At age thirteen, Hannibal had beheaded a man twice as big as this one. The monster under the bed was not afraid of the trembling child.

"Well, leave the key in the mailbox," the man said nonetheless, which wasn't making much sense when put just after his last comment.

After that demand, he left the bedroom, leaving Hannibal alone with the money and the spare key.

When he heard the front door being closed and locked, he sat up on the bed. Right away, he felt something warm drip out of him, and it wasn't the most pleasant sensation in the world. It felt dirty and soiled, without any post orgasmic bliss to numb it or take the mind away. It was nothing special, nothing beautiful. Just dirt inside and outside of him.

Hannibal stood up, sensing the semen run down his inner thighs. He had thought of napping here, making the most out of a bed and a roof while he had them, but he couldn't afford it. He really couldn't let the wife see him. Because he couldn't kill the husband. Not right now. Not when the victim would so easily be connected with that mysterious young man outside the bar.

Hannibal didn't want to reproduce the errors of his youth. The years during which he had killed without a care for tomorrow were not that far away. But, in the meantime, he had learned the value of freedom and he wouldn't throw it all away for the sake of his short-lived pleasure. He was an adult now. He was meant to have mastered patience by now.

Ignoring the unpleasant sensation, he took the money from the bedside table and walked around the house until he was able to find the bathroom. Before stepping inside the

shower, he stopped by the mirror and looked at his reflection.

It had been much rougher than he had expected it to be. On his naked skin, he could see the red bruises where he had been slapped, the black ones where he had been grabbed and thrown, the small superficial cuts where the belt had landed. He didn't have to look down to know of the few pinkish trails of blood staining his thighs. He had felt the tearing while it was happening. It wasn't enough to hurt him, however. Not truly. No amount of pain could pierce through the first layer of his dermis, and certainly not one born from such tepid and anxious violence. That didn't mean he had enjoyed it. He hadn't. But it meant he wouldn't stoop low enough to be bothered by it.

Instead, he continued to look at his face in the mirror. Seeing past the red, bitten lips and the darker cheekbone. Trying to spot what others would see.

He was young. Younger than he felt. He had yet to reach the end of his second decade, and with the arrogance of brilliant youth embedded in his features, he understood why it wasn't hard for him to get teachers to take stands for him and fellow residents to gleefully obey him. There was nothing mysterious in the fact that, even without money, family or legality, Hannibal had so rarely slept in the street since he had fled to the United States.

But he knew it wouldn't last. Brilliance was only endearing when the eyes were not yet used to it. And youth was defined by the fact that it had to fade. Therefore, he needed to have something else going on for himself. Something that would answer others' aesthetic criteria, since his were so at odds with the rest of humanity.

He needed something that would lure and seduce. Would Mephistopheles have sold his pact so easily if he hadn't been able to make Faust hard for him? Hannibal knew more than most that art couldn't be beautiful only in depth. Its surface needed to arouse the senses just as much.

He looked down on the money in his hand, and counted in silence.

150$ in small bills.

That was his worth today. He could work on increasing it.

The hour that followed, Hannibal used it to try smiles in the mirror. To see what kind of warmth suited his eyes best. What fashion of goodness sat well on his features.

He knew he was talented. In absolutely everything he bothered to do.

In no time, he would become priceless.

Alana

"If you want to use the toilets, the closest are at the end of the corridor."

Alana looked at Hannibal with an unhidden surprise. It took her a few seconds to understand why he was offering such information.

"Most men don't think of that," she finally said. "They expect us to stay around. It pleases their ego."

"My ego cannot be hurt in that way. And even if it could, it would mean less to me than your comfort."

Slowly, with the awkwardness characteristic of lovers who didn't know each other enough yet, she caressed Hannibal's hair, pushing it away from his face. Her smile was sincere, and her eyes were shining with fondness and appreciation.

He knew exactly what she was thinking. That he was not like the other men she had known so far. That he was better. Kinder and safer. That it was unbelievable that someone like him could have such human and altruistic qualities. And that she had never known that tenderness could be so arousing.

He knew exactly what she was thinking because he had provoked that pattern of thought himself. He had modeled himself for that exact fondness in her eyes. And he was

always virtuous at every skill he decided to develop. He played hearts like he played theremins.

He smiled at her; his pride successfully disguised as affection.

"I am going to use your toilets," she ultimately said.

She laid a kiss on top of his forehead before standing up and walking away. Hannibal appreciated the grace of her naked body moving around his bedroom but, the second she closed the door behind her, he straightened up and glanced at his alarm clock. He didn't have much time left before the drugs he had put in Alana's drink would start to kick in. He had managed his time very carefully, not offering himself any true margin of error. He had a lot to do tonight.

Drive to the hospital without speeding. Sabotage the cameras. Get to Abel Gideon. Kill and display the guards. Bring Gideon back to his house. Settle him comfortably in his basement. And sneak back in bed before Alana could wake up or Jack could knock. And it wasn't healthy to not give the brain and the body their needed sleep. If he could get a few hours of rest after this busy night, it would be for the better. He was confident he could pull it off. When couldn't he?

The door of the bedroom opened, and Alana walked back to the bed. Hannibal opened his arm, and she found a place against his chest, her forehead resting on the hollow of his neck. Her skin was cold and shivering, and he held her close to warm her up. Only superficial warmth. The one he had managed to develop by deliberately and carefully picking the right fabric for his person suit. But it was enough to warm his partners up. Alana let go of a soft, whispery moan as she curled up against him, getting from him everything she could wish for. Her guard fully down, her body surrendered to him, she closed her eyes. She was trembling with fatigue. Hannibal hadn't been rough with her. He never was, in bed. But he had made sure to exhaust her to her core. To overwhelm her with pleasure and emotions, to ignite every part of her body, to drown in endorphin every cell of her brain. He needed her to remember how thoroughly worn out she had been, and why she had fallen asleep so quickly and so heavily. He dared to think he had done a wonderful job, judging by how her eyes seemed to flutter on their own.

However, no matter how tired she was, she didn't have it in her to not reciprocate in some way. She raised her head, enough to offer her lips to Hannibal. A kiss as a reward and a praise. Hannibal gracefully collected it. He lowered his head and laid his lips on top of Alana's. The contact nearly chaste after what they had just explored with each other.

Hannibal was certain his former student could taste her own intimacy on his tongue and lips. He had put them to good use, and he could still sense her more than the wine he had had tonight.

If she was unlucky enough to make all the mistakes that would motivate Hannibal to one day eat her, he would make sure she would get to taste her own flesh beforehand. It was only fair. She had given that opportunity to Hannibal after all. It would be simple reciprocity.

"Will we regret this in the morning?" she asked between their lips, as she was slowly falling asleep in the bed of her former teacher.

"Why would we?"

"Because half the fun of impulses is to regret them."

Hannibal leaned back, just enough for their eyes to meet. And he carefully took a strand of her hair to put it back behind her ear.

"I don't do regrets," he told her, truthfully.

"Lucky you."

"For this particular impulse, you make it easy."

She smiled again. She then pressed her face against him and kissed his chest, with the weakness of someone on the verge of sleep. The drugs were speeding up the process, but even without them, she would have naturally lay down by his side for the rest of the night.

For a moment, he wondered if his aunt would have stayed as well if he had been less honest. Less vulnerable.

Certainly.

Sex was a tool. A pleasant, beautiful, meaningful one, but a tool, nonetheless. Back then, he hadn't known how to wield it. He couldn't blame anyone but himself for having lost that encounter.

But now, he knew better. He was at the peak of his life and skills, and he was not defeatable anymore. Such a shame for everyone else but him.

But it was with contentment that he felt Alana fall asleep against him. Everything was falling into place for his meticulous plan to enfold.

Lady Murasaki had been wrong when she had said there was nothing in him to love, because he loved himself very much. And with that specific love came a great strength, that couldn't have come from the kind of love he had had for his aunt.

He was eager to let Will know about the night he had just shared with Alana. He wondered how that always surprising man would react to it.

Bedelia

Hannibal pushed the pillow around to prop his upper body into a more comfortable position, then he slid both hands under his head.

He didn't have to do anything at all. Bedelia was effectively riding him. Apart from a slight motion of his hips from time to time, he wasn't meant to do anything more than lie down. She wouldn't stomach his touches, his kisses nor his words. It was barely if she accepted his eyes on her. They were having sex if one was being technical about it, but the truth was that she was pleasuring herself with him more so than she was letting him pleasure her.

Hannibal was not too down about that. He was tired, and it felt nearly comfortable to not have to triumph. Bedelia wasn't fooled by the person suit anymore, and wouldn't fall for

the many traps and tricks with which Hannibal usually dressed his behavior. They both knew where they were standing. And it was not a place of adoration.

Bedelia wanted the sweet relief of orgasm, that would settle her stress and calm her nerves. Hannibal thought she could use it indeed, taking a break from her exhausting act of control. As for him, he didn't wish for much. He didn't remember the last time he had genuinely enjoyed sex. Maybe with Lady Murasaki. And then a couple of times, when he had found in it a topic of curiosity. Now, it was barely more than vaguely pleasant.

Bedelia was a beautiful woman. The light falling on her bare chest, the waist dancing above his hips, her bottom brushing over his thigh, it was a fantastic spectacle for him. Certainly, he would draw her at some point, haloed by her magnificence. But it was for the senses only. It didn't reach anything deeper than that. His body could feel it. It was pleased by it and was stating so with rushes of blood going south. But the information was lost somewhere between his skin and his brain, and he just didn't mind.

He knew he was fully dissociating from his own body, when he was sharing that kind of intimacy. His mind simply couldn't be bothered beyond the simply solved mental exercise. He knew what he had to do, was doing it, his brain had little to commend and could therefore busy itself in any other way it saw fit.

That was why, as his wife was bringing herself to climax, he let his mind wander. Everywhere that would interest him. He thought of his plans for the next day. Of that man that was asking too many questions on Roman Fell's old friends, that beautiful new piece he was currently studying at the Palazzo Capponi, or what kind of stars would be visible in the sky if he were to look through the window right now, past the low clouds.

Tonight, only three of his nine trains of thought were dedicated to Will. He was doing relatively well, all things considered. But, as he was realizing that, a fourth train of thought joined the previous ones.

Nearly half of his mind.

His eyes on Bedelia, he focused on how her golden curls were falling on her breasts. Her erect nipples piercing through that silky curtain. A sight of such blatant erotism, it seemed purposeful.

He wondered if Will could still harden, with all the drugs he had to be under in order to heal from having been penetrated by Hannibal. He didn't think so. That amused him.

Bedelia put her hands on his sides, to keep her balance. That would be the only contact that they would have. More, and he would frighten her, ruining her orgasm. It was not a kind thing to do. Therefore, he didn't reach for her. He kept his hands under his head and left her at her fun.

By looking slightly on the right or on the left, he could see his forearms, and the long, wide twin scars Will had vicariously left him. A scar for a scar. Hannibal had left behind the vestiges of a cesarian section, and Will of a suicide attempt. Life and death. Always so fitting.

They could have been so meaningful together.

Bedelia's nails scratched the soft skin of his flank as she finally made herself come, sighing with relief as the orgasm washed over her.

He knew that wouldn't last long. Soon enough, she would be back to her fear, her anger, and her mental agony. In less than a minute, she would get off of him. Maybe finish him quickly with her hand. More probably just leave him behind. She would walk to the shower and try to wash the guilt and the dirt away. The feeling of Hannibal inside her would soil the image of the blameless victim she wished she could nurture and grow. She would hate him and herself just a bit more tonight.

Hannibal was sorry for that tremendous pain she was in. Not sorry enough to free her from it of course. But still. Somewhat sorry.

And he wasn't wrong in his guesses. A few seconds after the end of her orgasm, once all her muscles had had time to relax, and then remembered they were in the same room as their predator and therefore tense again, she got off of him. She didn't look back as she left the bedroom for the adjoining bathroom. Leaving Hannibal alone, as he was meant to be after sex.

He remembered that, a long time ago, at the beginning of their conversations, Will had said he felt a connection to the Chesapeake Ripper. As if he was doing the same thing as him, at the same moment of the day.

Now, Hannibal could feel that connection too. He was so certain Will was currently being just as alone as he was. Just as underwhelmed. Just as disappointed.

Or maybe he just hoped it was the case.

He looked down on his erection, left uncared for, and his right hand left the pillow to find a place on his stomach. There wasn't much he could do. A cold shower after Bedelia would be done with the bathroom, since she was never long. Or denial. He could close his eyes and let his mind leave his body behind. Or maybe a few skillful caresses to get it over with. Hannibal had never enjoyed masturbation but, like every basely utilitarian action, it had its perks. His fingers lingered on his thighs, just an inch away from his genitalia.

Will was very present on his mind tonight. Pleasuring himself would be a dangerous path to take. It was toying with an idea Hannibal wasn't sure he was comfortable with. He couldn't even spell it out in the privacy of his own mind. No matter the temptation, he couldn't indulge. He caressed his thigh one last time, nearly as a self-congratulating gesture, then he took his hand away, back under his head.

Would his sense of control one day be praised to the true level of its worth? He didn't think so.

"Do you need a hand?"

Bedelia, her hair dampened by water, a towel around her chest, was standing in the doorframe, her eyes on Hannibal's obvious predicament.

"No, thank you," he politely declined. "It is kind of you to offer however."

He grabbed the blanket by the end of the bed and pulled it over his waist, hiding his modesty. He also bent his knee and folded his leg to prevent the undignified bulge from being too noticeable.

She walked to the bed and sat down on the mattress, her back on Hannibal. The smell of her shampoo reached his nose. He had chosen it for her. He chose everything when it came to her. And he had always had a fondness for jasmine.

"Is it easier for you to love, if that love remains unfulfilling?"

Hannibal, who had been wondering if Bedelia would recoil if he were to entangle his finger in one of her curls, let go of his former thought to focus on that beginning of a conversation.

"Are we speaking of love?" he enquired.

"You are. Or at least, you are thinking of love."

Hannibal turned on his side. The sight of Bedelia's back reminded him of another back, sitting on the side of another bed, after another night of love.

"What would intimacy feel like, with him?" she asked.

And she didn't have to specify who that '*him*' was. At that point, it was just redundant.

"It will not happen," he merely stated.

"You don't think he will come after you? Or you after him?"

"I don't think either of us is interested in that kind of intimacy."

"Either of you? Why wouldn't you be?"

Bedelia turned toward him, looking at him from above her shoulder. She read more in his silence than he had wished to say.

"You are not a teenager anymore, Hannibal. You are past thinking that sex dirties or disrespects someone."

"It is not about dirt or respect," he said. "It is simply that it is... not enough."

She pieced together what he was purposefully leaving out.

"What about sex is in any way below him?"

She knew what his answer would be. Or at least elements of it. But she wanted him to voice it.

"Everything," he said.

"More precisely?"

He took a long breath. His tepid, residual arousal had subsided, and he was now in a nearly dignified state.

"Its shallowness."

But the answer sounded wrong, even to his ears. Not quite hitting the marks. And Bedelia sensed it as well. Always so perceptive. Clever, clever woman.

"Why would you not be interested, Hannibal?"

She knew exactly what she wanted him to say. Why couldn't she say it herself?

"Because I don't enjoy it."

"Sex?"

"Not with him."

"I heard that, Hannibal. The question is why? What is different between him and others."

"The difference is that he matters."

That felt like a slap. Maybe it was meant as one. But it completely missed Bedelia. She wished she didn't matter at all to him. That would have made her life a whole lot simpler.

"Why is sex not worthy of people who matter?" she continued to ask.

Hannibal was tired of this conversation. Now disinterested. It was late, and tomorrow he wanted to have a rested mind to work on identifying that new masterpiece that he had been entrusted with. Will already had enough of his trains of thought. He didn't want to talk about him furthermore. Not as long as he wouldn't have proof that Will was also speaking of him.

He turned on his other side, away from the conversation, but Bedelia's fresh hand found his chin. She didn't caress it, but she didn't waver either. She kept his gaze on her own.

"Why not, Hannibal?" she asked again.

And he finally admitted it.

"Because I do not like how it ends."

The husband and the wife looked at each other in silence, hearing the words that had just been pronounced.

She then let go of him, and he was able to turn on his other side, his back to the marital bed.

"It will one day come the time for you to consider your own biases, Hannibal."

"Will it?"

He brought his pillow closer to his cheek, breathing in the scent of the fabric softener to push away the fragrance of jasmine floating around.

Why had he chosen that shampoo? He could think off the top of his head of dozens of better smelling fragrances.

"You picked and chose the experiences that most fitted a narration you had already decided for yourself, Hannibal. You have spent a lifetime proving a point first supposed a long time ago."

"And what would be that point?" he asked, to humor her, but his tone was clearly letting her know she was trading in dangerous territory.

She truly wouldn't want to displease him beyond a certain point...

"I don't know," she admitted, standing up again to go fetch night clothes. "But I think you want to figure it out before seeing him again."

Will

Hannibal was out of breath.

But that was the last and the most minor of his struggles. The main one was his brain, ripped apart, torn between felicity and agony.

He could feel two distinctive and equally overwhelming burns in his body. The first one in his stomach, where the wound inflicted by the Dragon was still fresh and throbbing. And the second one in his chest, where his heart seemed to be gorging itself with blood without ever squeezing it away.

He could still feel it on his skin, and the more he was thinking of it, the more his heart was swelling.

Will's lips on his mouth. Will's hand on his waist. Will's breath against his neck. Will's flesh inside him.

Will. Everywhere where he could feel and sense.

It had been too much. Too intense. He didn't remember having been as overwhelmed since his sister's death. Because he had simply been unable to keep any distance between himself and his senses. No dissociation to protect him. No intellectualization to grant him control. Will's presence was so burning, it had pierced through his skin, had melted the walls of his mind palace, and had spread fires from corridor to corridor, from hidden room to hidden room.

He hadn't seen it coming. He hadn't been able to do anything against it. None of them had been. They had both been slightly feverish, slightly weak. And the longing and the carving had reached a peak as they had been lying side by side, in that small cabin of a lost boat on the sea.

It had just... happened.

It had been too short, and too overwhelming for Hannibal to even think of anything. Or, more likely, his brain had sabotaged its thoughts in order to not have them interfere.

But now, he had time to realize. As Will was a few inches away from him, struggling to breathe as well, he could fully make sense of what had happened. And what it meant. Unsurprisingly, Will, once he got a hold of his breath again, stood up. And walked away. Allowing Hannibal some space.

In all his years of life, Hannibal had never had any occasion to develop regrets. Now, he was wondering if it was a good time to start. He shouldn't have done that. He had higher hopes for Will. Brighter dreams. He had spent years in jail, fantasizing about all the lives he could live with that man. About all the words he wanted to say and hear, all the moments of sincerity and vulnerability he wanted to share.

And, at the first opportunity, he had answered his basest instincts and indulged in meaninglessness. His fever and his injury were no excuse to justify such a blatant and humiliating lack of better judgement. And the empty bed was a just retribution for it.

His heart had fully deflated when Will had left the cabin and now its membrane, that had been too stretched, was covered in tears and cuts. The dull, vague pain in his chest reminded him of another one. His last love echoing his first one. If Hannibal had not been so disappointed in himself, he would have been able to enjoy the irony.

Right now, it was just leaving a sour taste in his mouth.

At that moment, Will walked back into the room, carrying a towel and a washcloth. Hannibal looked at him, slightly puzzled, as he sat on the side of the bed.

"What?" Will asked, when he realized that Hannibal was observing him.

"Nothing."

Will put the towel down on the mattress and took the washcloth. With his hand, he slightly parted Hannibal's legs, lightly pressing on one knee to turn it outward, and he brought the cloth to the thighs to wipe away the stains left by their intercourse. The fabric was soft and warm, leaving a wet and fresh trail behind. And Hannibal observed with a genuine if perplexed fascination his skin being cleaned with care and diligence.

"You're hurt?" Will asked, his focus on his precise gestures.

"No..." Hannibal answered, and the word sounded more like a question than an answer.

"My chest hurts like a bitch."

Hannibal wished he could look up to check if Will's stab wound was still fully closed and safely healing, but he simply couldn't bring himself to rip his eyes from Will's hand.

"Mine too," he simply said, more to himself than to Will.

"You're injured?"

Surprised by that possible wound he hadn't noticed, Will had stopped his gestures, looking at Hannibal's chest.

"I don't think so," Hannibal reassured him, though he was still not fully able to invest himself in that conversation, "it is going away."

"Oh. Ok."

Will resumed, letting the washcloth travel up until everything was meticulously cleaned away.

"Better?" Will asked.

"Yes," Hannibal guessed.

Will put the washcloth away and, with the towel, he dried the wet and cooling skin. The fabric wasn't as soft, but Will hadn't been particularly rough, and the skin was not sore enough to need that gentleness. Yet, Will was delivering it without seeming to think twice about it. When it was done, he discarded the towel as well and lay back down.

Right next to Hannibal.

He rolled on his side and Hannibal mimicked him, so they would face each other, their eyes separated by nothing but a couple of inches. Will's hand was resting flat on the mattress, right between them. Without any cover or protection. Staying where it could be grabbed at any moment.

Hannibal stayed away from it. A couple of his trains of thought were slowly regaining their cruising speed, passing by their usual stations. They wanted to question Will about everything. Make that wonderful man dwell on himself and voice what their shared moment was telling about him. Maybe force him to point out some of his inconsistencies.

But the other trains had fully derailed and therefore he stayed silent.

"How conscious are you?"

Hannibal, though his eyes were on Will, was somewhere inside his mind, and he had to crawl out to catch that question.

"Why are you asking?"

"Cause you seem... off."

Will tilted his head to find a better place against the pillow.

"You seemed fine enough before. But if you're not fully conscious, I wanna know how badly I screwed up. Is it fever? The painkillers?"

"I am fully conscious."

"Then what is it?"

Hannibal didn't want to bother himself with the tedious task of finding an answer. His eyes had left Will's, and it was now on the hand between them. He could grab it. Distract Will's attention. Maybe even play with his mind a bit. That was how he handled that kind of intimacy. That was what he was perfect at.

"Hannibal?"

Will's voice was soft, yet it was able to crawl up Hannibal's ear canal, right up his brain.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Right here."

"What is it then?"

Hannibal had to face it. He had no desire to play his usual games with Will. They felt crude now. They had risen above them.

"It happened too fast," he tried to answer. "And it ended too quickly."

"Well..." Will tried to shrug but the pain in his pectoral stopped him in time. "I don't blame you. You've spent three years in jail."

Will missed the meaning of the sentence, and Hannibal felt the irrepressible need to correct him. To be understood. Will had that dangerous ability to make him want to be fully bare to the man's sight.

"I don't blame myself either," he said. "Nor do I blame you."

They had both been unable to stand long. And they had all the reasons in the world to justify that eagerness. But that was not what it was about.

"I didn't have the time to pull up the pretenses."

"The pretenses?" Will frowned, sensing that they were getting to something too important to be misunderstood. "What pretenses?"

"The ones that will make it pleasant."

"Pleasant for who?"

"For you Will. And thus, for me as well."

Hannibal could see the thoughts twisting themselves behind Will's face, trying to find the missing piece in the conversation.

"I don't understand, Hannibal," he simply confessed.

Taking the easy way out, and making Hannibal walk the hard path.

He had no desire to say it aloud. He didn't want those words to leave his mouth. But they were the only ones bubbling in his mind, the only thought truly spelled out.

"Some decorum is needed, Will. To make it more substantial."

"To make *what* more substantial?"

"Me. Without them, there is nothing in me to..."

That he wouldn't say. It was too pathetic. And too rough against his tongue.

"...enjoy," he finished instead.

Will didn't seem to understand much more from that, and Hannibal continued before any question could be asked.

"I wouldn't say that it was the pinnacle of our intimacy, anyway. Falling from the cliff, eating the ex-wife, those were precious moments as well, suspended in time. I am simply wondering if I didn't have some way to make it all more meaningful. Add spiritual canonization to the physical craving. I do believe, however, that your mere presence was already doing just that. Leaving little for me to bring."

The more he was speaking, the more his trains were being pulled back on their rails. He wasn't ashamed of his former overwhelmed state. He found pride in the idea of being bewildered by Will. But finding back his usual self undeniably felt good.

Will, however, was far too clever to let Hannibal be comfortable. He disregarded without any hesitation all the elaborate thoughts Hannibal had voiced for him, and went right back to the sensitive core.

"There's nothing in you to enjoy?" he repeated.

Hannibal kept his sigh to himself. Where had gone the time where his words could so easily lose Will in the mist?

"Where does that come from?" he asked.

"Where does any word ever come from, Will?"

"No. No, don't bullshit me," Will said, a vague gesture of his hand brushing away Hannibal's question. "I'm beginning to get a good grip on you. You never lacked self-esteem. You adore yourself."

"I do."

There was no point in denying it. Hannibal had a genuine admiration for the being he was.

"Then why are you saying that?"

Because it was the sentence right on the front of his mind, and Hannibal wanted to lay his brain obscenely bare to Will.

"Because you asked."

"Ok, fine..."

Will straightened up, resting his elbow on the pillow to support his weight.

"That sentence. The one about what's in you. Who said it?"

"I did. A minute ago."

"No. I know your words, Hannibal. Been hearing them in my head for years. They don't sound like that. Someone else said that."

There was no doubt in Will's mind. It was voicing a certitude that even Hannibal couldn't gaslight him into doubting.

"Maybe, yes."

"It was said to you?"

"It was."

"By whom?"

It was a hard question. Even in good faith, how was Hannibal meant to summarize who Lady Murasaki was? Any word would be reductive.

Therefore, he reduced her in a way that was meaningful for Will.

"My first partner."

"Damn. Great way to start relationships. No wonder you're the way you are."

"Now, let's not be condescending please. That is the kind of mistake that comes with disastrous consequences. You know more than anyone that I don't have an explanation."

Will passed a hand on his face, rubbing his forehead for a moment, thinking of what was being said.

"What did she say exactly?" he asked.

Something must be sounding off to his ear. He certainly could tell the words that had been given to him were not the right ones. He could sense that kind of thing more than Hannibal himself.

"Nothing much. She asked something of me. I didn't deliver. When she walked away, I told her how genuinely I loved her. And she said there was nothing left in me to love."

"And you believed her?"

"No. I worked on my worth. Increased it drastically through the years. There is a lot in me to love. I made myself rewarding."

"You worked on your worth? How does one do that?"

"By giving. By molding themselves after the needs of the ones evaluating their worth. But tonight, I didn't find a way to offer you anything substantial Will. I could have catered myself more accurately. Make it more pleasant for you. I hope you believe that it is not the kind of mistake I will make twice."

Will barely listened to the end of it. The last word had not yet left Hannibal's mouth that he had turned away. He sat up on the bed, his arm on his knee, his eyes on the dark wood of

the cabin. Stepping away from Hannibal to focus on his own thoughts. Finding his way through them in order to reach a conclusion.

Hannibal respectfully remained silent, waiting for the end of that reflection. After a full minute, Will ruffled his hair, breathed in and turned to Hannibal. He lay down by his side again, barely an inch away, and most of Hannibal's trains of thought derailed once again.

They were so fragile. Frustratingly so. A glance from Will would speed them up beyond what physics could tolerate. Of course, they would fly off at the first turn.

Will's mouth was so very close to his. That was all that Hannibal could think about. So very close. And the craving, barely satiated, was rising again, eager for the burn of skin-on-skin contact.

"Hannibal," Will began.

And Hannibal couldn't hear a single sound. He could simply watch Will's lips move and think of how painfully he wanted to bite them.

"Your... how did you call it... pretenses?" Will continued. "Your decorum. Your molding. I don't give a single shit about them."

Slightly taken by surprise, it was enough for Hannibal to pay just a bit more mind to what Will was saying.

"To be fully honest, they piss me off. I find them insulting."

He had leaned an inch back, to make sure Hannibal was focusing on what he was saying.

"I'm not interested in being on the receiving end of them. They are unnecessary and distract me from what really matters. From the important core that lies behind. If you want to have sex with me, if you want intimacy, you'll have to forgo all that."

"Will, you..."

"No," Will cut him. "Could you just... not."

Hannibal stopped himself as Will was already brushing off whatever he had planned on saying.

"Talking will just make you want it more."

"Want what more?" Hannibal asked.

"To try. To deliver. When you have a tool, of course you wanna use it. So just don't. Don't talk."

Hannibal didn't, and Will nodded in approbation.

"There's no need for persuasion, Hannibal. Or coercion, or whatever it is that you're doing. I won. I just won. I got to you, I figured you out, it's too late for all that. You're naked."

And he was.

Undignifyingly. Where were his manners? And with them, his civility?

He grabbed the blanket that had been pushed to the side by their former activity. But Will stopped his gesture, bringing the blanket to him.

For a second, Hannibal was convinced that Will would force him to remain like that. Shamelessly exposed. But that didn't happen. Will simply unfolded the blanket and put it on his own over Hannibal, covering his tired body.

Hannibal, surrounded by that exact warmth that he had never truly been able to develop in him, closed his eyes. He didn't see but he sensed Will moving next to him, resting his head against Hannibal's, his lips on the cheek.

"You're cold?" he asked.

"I have been told."

"Bullshit."

Will's breath was wet and burning, sliding along Hannibal's neck and warming him up. He shivered with satisfaction. Which was unlike him. He had perfect control over his body. And he was not letting anything of his being reflect over his skin. Yet, this shiver was visceral.

And unexpectedly pleasurable. That uncontrolled shiver was... satisfying. Relieving. Hannibal wanted more of them.

"You've worked so hard on making me see you, Hannibal," Will whispered. "Haven't you?"

Keeping his eyes closed, he nodded. That he had.

"You've exhausted yourself. But you succeeded. I see you. It's too late for pretense. You made them meaningless."

He felt lips against his ears. Kissing it between two whispers.

"Now, you just gotta drop them."

"Are you certain there will be something to love, if I don't craft something myself?"

It was maybe the first time in his entire life that Hannibal had asked a question he didn't already know the answer to.

And it was vertiginous.

Thankfully, Will was holding him.

"I am. Absolutely certain."

Was it kindness or was it sincerity?

Hannibal wasn't sure. Did it mean he could choose his own answer?

"You said it yourself," Will pointed out, too clever to not guess Hannibal's state of mind. "You didn't do anything earlier. Yet you were perfect."

"It could be hard to find. What there is to love. There is not a lot of light in the depth. Hard to guess the shapes."

Will chuckled and it was a beautiful sound.

"It'll be fine. We will find it together."

Lulled by the ebb and flow, Hannibal embraced Will, their arms tightened and tangled together. He would not let go. They would fall asleep against each other. And, in the morning, Will would still be by his side. Bathing in his warmth. That was what Hannibal decided to believe.

Will would stay for the end.

And that was making every tearing and every climax worth it. Each of them a step toward a bliss Hannibal didn't know he could get. Waking up by his lover's side.

That sounded warm and lovely.

End Notes

I know it's not a very ambitious work, but I'm very happy with it, and I hope it brought you some entertaintment. Let me know if you enjoyed it.

Take good care of you and have a nice rest of the day/night :)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!